I've always had a strange relationship with my culture and the relationships that came along with it. Both my parents are Filipino, yet grew up in different parts of their culture—my mom being from low income, and my dad being higher class. My mom was more in tune with her background, whilst my dad was more "Americanized." Both sides came with their benefits and drawbacks. With my dad, I gained more exposure to Western society, and thus understood its norms. With my mom, I was able to better connect with my family, customs, and most importantly, my identity. Without my dad, I feel as if I would've had a harder time fitting in, and without my mom, I wouldn't truly know myself as the person I am today.

Growing up, I didn't consume much Filipino media, let alone literature. I was surrounded by American writings and broadcasting; more often than not it was kid's story books, shows, and Fox News (courtesy of my dad). Though every once in a while, I'd see the occasional Filipino drama my *lolo* and *lola* would watch. Although my grandparents prioritized my siblings and I picking up English over Tagalog—we'd have "better opportunities," as they'd call it—they, along with my mom, still took the time to incorporate it in our daily lives, and we picked up bits and pieces along the way. I distinctly remember phrasings such as "*punyeta*!" after my *lola* would get splashed with oil from frying lumpia, or "*putang ina ka*!" when my *lolo* would catch his finger on a nail as he built us a new contraption to play with, but those weren't exactly the ones we were supposed to remember.

As a kid, I knew my sister as "*ate*." Pronounced as ah-tay, it means older sister in Tagalog, one of the many languages of the Philippines and the language my family spoke. "*Ate*, I want to play pretend. *Ate*, I want a bite of your food. *Ate*, look what I can do. *Ate*, why won't you pay attention to me?" Everywhere she went, I went; I followed my sister as if I were her shadow. She was not only my *ate*, but I, myself, was an *ate*. Little did I know, the word had put me on a

pedestal to be a role model for my younger siblings—I had to follow in my older sister's footsteps, then pave the way for my younger brother and sister to follow. My mom, as well as my relatives, told me being an *ate* was an important task—my older sister would be the person I'd look up to the most in my life. It wasn't something I thought of often, until the day when there were tears pouring down a little girl's face as she was scolded for even uttering the word. "Never call me *ate* again."

At that moment, the world stopped spinning. I had never known something as simple as the word "*ate*" would lead to other kids reigning hell on my older sister. That very day, her classmates had been invited over, and in typical younger sibling fashion, I stepped in to be an annoyance. Though when I referred to her as "*ate*," I never would've anticipated the laughter of her colleagues. My *ate's*—my *sister's*—face was beet red with tears pricking at her eyes, nose scrunched up and hands balled into fists. Neither me or my parents knew she was getting picked on for her features, for the way the house smelled, or the language we had spoken. It never even crossed my mind that a similar situation was happening to me, as I just disregarded the comments and gestures I received at school as teasings and jokes. From that point forward, any previous Tagalog we had learned became forgotten.

I had to humor the kids in elementary when they would pull their eyes back and ask if I was Chinese or Japanese. I had no choice but to laugh when the kids in middle school would call me a "dog eater" or a "chink." I had to accept being recognized as a "dirty islander" when I told my high school peers that I was Filipino. My culture became something to hide behind closed doors, something to be ashamed of. *No more chicken adobo or garlic fried rice packed for lunch, you'll be made fun of for the smell. Don't speak any Tagalog, they'll think you're uneducated.*

While I didn't necessarily despise my culture growing up, it became something I had to avoid like the plague.

Despite trying to distance myself and hide my identity, I still found that I was approached, labeled, and even differentiated because of it. My appearance was another one of those things I was insecure about and something I couldn't run from, and it altered people's perceptions and first impressions of me. Aside from slurs and demeaning words, I received comments and backhanded compliments such as "you speak English really well," "you're pretty for an Asian," "your features are very exotic," or "you remind me of my wife from the Philippines." I'd never say anything upfront about it, at the time I wouldn't even allow myself to feel uncomfortable about what they'd say, but deep down it definitely felt wrong.

On one hand, I was too Asian to be American, and on the other, too American to be Asian. Little things made me realize that even with my best efforts, there were still day-to-day things in my life that were a part of my heritage. When we took off our shoes before entering the house, my friends would furrow their brows. When we ate with chopsticks, they'd stare at us with spoons and forks in hand. When we ate with our hands, their faces would twist in disgust. I found myself in a place of not belonging to any part of society. At family gatherings on my mom's side, the air would be heavy with the smell of Filipino food, and I'd sit awkwardly at the dinner table as my *titos* and *titas* would shake the house with their laughter and kill their throats singing karaoke. Some of them didn't speak a lick of English, while others were heavily accented or spoke broken English. A part of me wished I could understand them, possibly even speak to them, but at the same time I feared that I would be integrating myself too much into my culture. When it came to visiting my dad's side of the family, there was no semblance of culture aside from American—there was no Tagalog spoken, no Filipino food, and often I'd be surrounded by

family friends who were anything but Filipino. Thanks to him though, I was able to gain perspective on what life was like in the South, and find a place for myself in it. Even so, when the thing I steered clear from the most wasn't there, it felt like something was missing.

As the years went on, *lo and behold*, there was noticeably (at least, in my opinion) more Asian representation in mainstream media, along with Asian culture integrating itself into Western. Chinese food, anime, k-pop, boba, such simple things became a means of seeing myself and feeling a sense of normality, like I belonged. I found myself surrounded by Asian movies, shows, and music, and to my surprise, found comfort in what I saw. I went out of my way to learn more about Filipino culture, how it came to be, its customs, and as scary as it was, I confronted my mom about it. As adamant as she was never to teach us about it again after the instance with my sister, it was pure joy seeing her eyes light up, eager to have the opportunity again to teach her children about who they are. She'd never actually admit that, but I knew.

Throughout my journey, I actually managed to learn things about my mom (and my family) that I never knew before. My *lolo* and *lola* —her parents—had apparently moved to New York from the Philippines to raise my mom. With my grandparents knowing little to no English, she essentially served as their translator and grew up intimately with Filipino culture, as that was all my grandparents knew. She later went to the Philippines and stayed there during the duration of high school, coming back to the states for college, where she eventually met my dad. As it turns out, all the Filipino culture that he knows about today came from my mom. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't know much about what it's like being Filipino. No offense, dad.

From adding Filipino music to my playlists to learning to understand Tagalog (I can barely speak it, but we're getting there), my culture became something that I learned to cherish. Ever since I've been familiarized with it again, I've openly incorporated myself in my family's

customs and traditions. During special occasions—usually Thanksgiving, Christmas, or New Years—my family and relatives would have a *kamayan*, a traditional Filipino feast where an arrangement of food including fruit, grilled vegetables, meat, and seafood is eaten on banana leaves. Normally I'd exclude myself from such a thing, but now I dive right in, with my hands as my only utensils. For prom, I specifically wanted to wear traditional clothing, and so I wore a modern *Filipiniana*; I was tempted to get my boyfriend to wear a *Barong*, but I figured I'd spare him the embarrassment of looking like he was culturally appropriating. Nowadays, I ask my mom about recipes for authentic Filipino food, and cook them in the dorm with no shame. There are still things I avoid cooking though, like *ginisang sardinas*. As nostalgic as the smell is for me, I don't think people would enjoy the residence hall smelling like fish. She also refuses to give me the family recipe for *lumpia*—which has been passed down for generations—but I'll get it eventually. Maybe.

As I matured, I learned that culture was something that helped me grow together with and drift apart from certain people. It taught me that not everyone can accept differences, but simultaneously, there are those that welcome them with open arms. Comparing my experience to others, I've learned that culture can come in many forms, and that there is much more of it in people's lives than they believe. I have not only gained a bigger appreciation for my own, but an appreciation for learning about all the things that make people who they are today. The mannerisms, dress, language, religion, and rituals of different cultures are nothing to be ashamed of—cultural differences should not separate us from each other, but rather bring us together. "The beauty of the world lies in the diversity of its people."